DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 288 SP 011 902

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TITLE A Study of Parent Attitudes on the Parent-Teacher Conference.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 67p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$3.50 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); Opinions; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Teacher Conferences; *Parent Teacher Cooperation

ABSTRACT

This document studies parent attitudes toward parent-teacher communication in the setting of the parent-teacher conference. Respondents were asked to share in-depth their thoughts about parent-teacher communication in six topic areas: (1) the circumstances, (2) the importance, (3) the expectations, (4) the comfort level, (5) the characteristics, and (6) the description of what parents consider to be a meaningful parent-teacher conference. The questionnaire was distributed to 39 sets of parents of elementary school age children; the sample group would be characterized as upper middle class, professional or managerial, largely suburban families. Data obtained from the study verified the existence of seven theoretical conference types (social, progress, program, problem, helping, upset-parent, and sharing). Findings also indicate that parents (1) expect to confer with the teacher throughout the school year, (2) view the conference as important, (3) approach the conference with their own expectations, (4) are both comfortable and somewhat uncomfortable in the conference situation, (5) know what constitutes a meaningful conference, and (6) have constructive suggestions for making the conference more meaningful. Implications of the data elicited from the questionnaires lie mainly in the need for teachers, parents, administrators, supervisors, and educators to increase their knowledge about and skill in the parent-teacher conference as a means for facilitating communication between these two groups, with the objective of improving the child's educational experience. (MJB)

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ED147288

A STUDY OF PARENT ATTITUDES ON THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

A Qualifying Project Submitted To
The Graduate Committee Of The Institute
In Partial Fulfillment For The Degree Of
Master Of Arts In Human Relations

by
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Detroit, Michigan
May, 1977

SP011 902

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks

to my committee, Robert Bland, Dorothy Haupt

advisor, Douglas Powell,

to all who participated in research,

to parents,

and to children.

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CHAPTER I

OBJECTIVES, RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION

Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine parent attitudes toward parent-teacher communication in the setting of the parent-teacher conference.

Rationale

The home and the school support the growth of the child. Each takes its respective role, yet both must function together in a responsive and responsible manner. Parents and teachers are the persons involved in these roles. Home-school, and, therefore, parent-teacher communication is essential for the healthy growth of the child. Yet much of this communication lacks meaning.

The parent-teacher conference is the most direct and most meaningful mode of communication between the home and the school. The parent-teacher conference is often a ritual that avoids strain (Millar, 1969). Both parents and teachers need to increase their understanding of the parent-teacher conference. Parents and teachers need to become more sensitive to one another. Parents and teachers need to help each other in realizing the potential inherent in the parent-teacher relationship.

Introduction

Learning involves growth and change in behavior. The parent creates an environment for growth in the home. The teacher creates an environment for growth at school. Learning is a co-operative venture for parents, teacher, and child.

Therefore, working with parents is an essential part of working with children.

> Teachers are linked to parents by the children for whom they are responsible. The triangle should be completed and a more direct relationship established between teacher and parents. Parents should be partners in more than name; their responsibilities joint instead of several. (Bond, p. 43)

Parent and teacher attitudes and relationships are of value in understanding and appreciating one another, parents the teacher and teacher the parents, home the school and school the home.

The writer's experience indicates that most parents want to work with their child's teacher in making school the best experience for the child.

> It may be assumed that the provision for parents to visit schools has three main purposes, firstly to facilitate meetings between parents and teachers so that both come to know each other better, secondly to enable parents to see for themselves what the schools are doing and how their children are progressing, and, thirdly so that children feel that their parents are interested in what happens at school and that home and school are not separate worlds. (Plowden Report, p. 129)

The writer finds it quite natural for parents to talk with teachers about academic progress, learning problems and social relationships, less comfortable about emotional needs.

The parent-teacher conference is a means for two-way communication between parents and the teacher.

> But, the area of discrepancy between teachers' aims and what they imagine to be parents' is still very large. On the whole, teachers take an unflattering view of parents (and their own aims were remarkably idealistic) ... In fact, parents were substantially in agreement with the teachers. The area of (unnecessary) tension might be considerably reduced if parents and teachers established more effective means of communication. (Bond, p. 5)

The child is the focus of the parent-teacher conference. The parents and the teacher exchange information about the child which will help in understanding the child and better meeting his/her needs. Concerns are shared, as is responsibility.

The parent-teacher conference provides an opportunity for the parents and the teacher to support the growth and development of the child. It is the writer's observation in thirteen years of teaching that it is important for children to know the home and the school, the parents and the teacher, together fit into an integrated whole of the child's life.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE: ON THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

1. On parental involvement

The school has a role in the socialization of the young. (Clausen, 1968). Schools are a part of the value system of the culture.

Home-school relations link parents and teachers as partners in the education of the child. Their partnership aims to bring about a common understanding between the parents and the teachers of what children are like - how they grow, how they behave, the problems they face, how to help, and what good education is (Hymes, 1974).

Klein (1958) studied the impact of school entry upon the family. This transition period is marked by a regular sequence of phases in the adaptive process: 1) anticipatory concerns prior to school entry, 2) relief upon successful school entry, 3) role redefinition in family relationships, and 4) restoration of equilibrium.

Conflict between the home and the school is becoming widespread (Scher & Usdan, 1970; Wirt & Kirst, 1972). Issues center on power (Fantini, 1974) and control (Cunningham & Nystrand, 1969).

2. On the parent-teacher conference - why.

Teachers, principals and counsellors must have interviews with parents. Parents want to learn about school; educators want to help in guiding children (Bradley, 1971). Understanding home-school cooperation can result in a clearer understanding of what is desirable education and to an appreciation of the contributions of both parents and the teachers to that education (Osborne, 1959). Hogan (1975) reports the parent-teacher conference can boast considerable success in communicating with parents.

Parents have the right and the duty to know about the child's progress in school (Lurie, 1970; Kelly, 1974). They also have the right to remain uninvolved if they so choose (Lurie, 1970). Hymes (1974) suggests that concern about putting knowledge to work has been the final pressure leading to the acceptance of the face-to-face parent teacher conference.

Interviewing is the natural, free and easy talking together of parents and the teacher (Langdon & Stout, 1954). The British Department of Education and Science (1969) values the parent-teacher interview, the occasion when "parents and teacher can discuss in private and at their leisure the work and progress of each individual child" (p. 13).

The parent-teacher conference is held for the child by important people in his life; there is an exchange of views, and mutual understanding (Grissom, 1971). The personal conference

is the single most important instrument in building mutual understanding (Grant, 1952). Private talks are essential if parents and the teacher are to understand the child's rate of growth, interests, work capacity and emotional needs.

The need for and the purpose of the conference should be clear to both the parents and the teacher. The conference provides the opportunity to discuss the progress and the procedures relative to working with the child (Leeper, 1974). The National School Public Relations Association (1970) characterizes the parent-teacher conference as a two-way exchange of information about the child, that which the parents and the teacher have in common. The parent-teacher conference represents one of the most profitable ways in which parents and teacher can share their experience (Read, 1971) and support each other's efforts (Millar, 1969).

The feelings parents and teachers have toward each other lead them to think, talk, and plan together on how to help the child in growing and learning, thus building "good working relationships" (Stout & Langdon, 1958).

3. On the parent-teacher conference - how

The British Department of Education and Science (1968) suggests ways in which parents and teachers might talk with one another: 1) an initial introduction, 2) regular interviews, 3) written reports, 4) informal visits, 5) open days and other occasions, and 6) visits to the children's homes.

Ballard and Strang (1964), Heffernan and Todd (1969), Bradley (1971) and Bond (1973) define the structure for a successful conference. The following sequence is suggested: 1) invitation, 2) greeting, 3) positive statements, 4) strengths and weaknesses, 5) work, 6) listening and talking, 7) area for improvement, 8) summary, and 9) invitation.

The content of the parent-teacher conference is discussed by Langdon and Stout (1954), Heffernan and Todd (1969) and Bradley (1971). Topics focus on school subjects, attitudes toward school, social development, personality, special talents and abilities, and any obstacles to growth and achievement.

A great deal of material is concerned with developed guidelines for the parent-teacher conference. D'Evelyn (1945) and Bailard and Strang (1964) suggest the responsibility for the success or failure of the conference rests primarily with the teacher. The role of the teacher is focused on preparation, the setting, privacy, the time limit, rapport, positive statement, sensitivity, the role of the listener, confidentiality, suggestion, alternatives, action, cooperation and summation (D'Evelyn, 1945; Bailard & Strang, 1964; National School Public Relations Association, 1970; Bradley, 1971; Leeper, 1974). Lurie (1970) suggests that parents have the right to demand a good conference, being concerned about convenience, scheduling, time limit, privacy, topics discussed, questions, information, and records.

4. On communication

The field of communication offers insight into the dynamics of the parent-teacher conference. This area is little explored in the parent-teacher conference literature.

The parent-teacher conference is the best means of parent-teacher communication. The communication process, based on understanding, respect and appreciation, is central to the conference (Bailard & Strang, 1964). The feelings of the parents and of the teacher toward one another and toward the conference are an important variable (Langdon & Stout, 1954; Stout & Langdon, 1958). Questions are presented for consideration.

Satir (1972) states that "communication is the single largest factor determining what kinds of relationships he (a human being) makes with others and what happens to him in the world about him" (p. 30). Communication determines relationships.

"Real communication involves the exchange of meaning between individuals" (Cawelti, 1966, p. 294). Effective communication requires an attempt to understand ourselves and others better; it involves more than mechanics, techniques and words. The nature of communication involves listening, speaking, and how the two work together to produce communication (Brown, 1973).

Meaning comes through living encounters, the confrontation and the meeting through encounter (Moustakas, 1967). The quality of the personal relationship matters most (Rogers, 1965).

Attitude is shown in congruence, empathy, positive regard, and the unconditionality of regard. Respect for the person and his potentialities is implicit.

Placating, blaming, computing and distracting are four patterns in communication (Satir, 1972). Four approaches to the conference are: 1) the nonconfrontational approach, 2) the confrontational approach, 3) the indirect approach, and 4) the direct approach (Casavis, 1970).

Communication failures are important in turning adjustment or learning difficulties into serious problems (Millar, 1969). Silence, thereby avoiding emotionally loaded areas, occurs by mutual consent; a crisis develops. Frustration and failure produce anxiety and hostility, accumulating in a residue of anxiety and guilt; parents blame teachers and teachers blame parents. The accumulated feelings must be diffused to restore effective communication.

> If through such understanding parents and teachers can approach their conference a little less defensively, with a little more tolerance for each other's initial sensitivities, they may well be able to deal with the areas of concern rather than avoid them. By dealing with these problems they will be bringing into focus the mutuality that binds them, that is, their concern for the child they both seek to serve. (p. 399)

Mutual understanding and respect are keys to successful communication.

Chilman (1971) questions whether or not parents and teachers should operate as a partnership team in full communication with

each other. School is school and home is home; the child wants to claim both for himself. Parents and teachers should work cooperatively, but perhaps not so closely that the child loses his sense of identity as a separate person.

> Thus, a bit more relaxation, a bit more empathy, a bit more recognition of the many complex factors that shape life for all of us might help parents, teachers and children to communicate more freely with each other as human beings, each of whom has something to teach and something to learn. (p. 125)

Parents and teachers can work together.

5. On case studies

Case studies of the parent-teacher conference are limited. D'Evelyn (1945) discusses representative types of conferences to help teachers analyze the parent-teacher conference. Cases dealing with problems (academic, social, and emotional) and no-problem areas are considered. Langdon and Stout (1954) consider areas of discussion with parents of children of particular ages.

Heffernan and Todd (1969) consider various conference situations handled by a teacher, a principal or a counseling team. Bailard and Strang (1964) present dialogues concerning the pre-school child, the child with a reading problem, the gifted ghild, the mentally retarded or slow learning child, and a vocational guidance situation.

The nonconfrontational approach, the confrontational approach, the indirect approach, and the direct approach to the conference are illustrated by Casavis (1970). Case studies include a conference with a new family, a followup conference, and a counselor-role conference. The teacher as counselor encounters a problem of social awareness, an explosive situation, unnecessary concern, reading, affection needs, a minority child, a family conflict.

Summary

The literature on the parent-teacher conference indicates the necessity for and a general acceptance of the parent-teacher conference. The parent-teacher conference is viewed as the communication exchange between the parents and the teacher. These exchanges are essential if both parents and the teacher are to understand, support, and help the child in development.

Materials focused on the pre-school situation seem to devote more attention to parent-teacher communication than do materials focused on the school situation. The literature is directed to the mechanics of the parent-teacher conference: the circumstances for talking together, the structure of a parent-teacher conference, the content of the parent of the parent-teacher conference, and suggested guidelines for the parent-teacher conference.

The field of interpersonal communication offers insight into the dynamics of the parent-teacher conference. The

communication process is central to the parent-teacher conference; yet this area is little explored.

Case studies of the parent-teacher conference are limited. Most of the existing studies discuss representative types of parent-teacher conferences and conference situations.

After a thorough review of the literature, questions are raised. Why is the parent-teacher conference not more closely linked to the area of communication? Why is knowledge on interpersonal communication not applied to the parent-teacher relationship and the parent-teacher conference situation? What are the attitudes of parents and teachers toward the parent-teacher conference? Is the teacher aware of the attitudes held by parents?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA: A STUDY OF PARENT ATTITUDES ON THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

There are a limited number of research instruments to measure parent-teacher attitudes.

The Parent Attitude Research Instrument (PARI) directed toward mothers and child-rearing, has found widest use as an assessment of parent attitudinal changes. Tests and Measurement in Child Development: A Handbook, Johnson and Bommarito, ed., (1971) includes a section on the attitudes of parents toward school, yet no mention is made of the teacher.

Handbook of Research on Teaching, N. L. Gage, ed., (1963) does not mention this topic. Lowery (1969) measured the attitudes of parents toward teachers using projective techniques, Jenkins (1951) studied the relationship between parents and teachers with interest in the nature of the relationship and the barriers between parents and teachers. Schaefer (1974) has designed a conceptual scheme and instrument to measure parent-teacher involvement and interaction using attitudinal scales.

Questions regarding parent attitudes toward parent-teacher communication, particularly the parent-teacher conference, remain. The questions, formulated by the writer upon reflection of thirteen years teaching experience, cover six topic areas:

1) the circumstances, 2) the importance, 3) the expectations, 4) the comfort level, 5) the characteristics, and 6) the description of what parents consider to be a meaningful parent-teacher conference.

The attitudes of parents toward parent-teacher communication in the parent-teacher conference seem a particularly relevant area for study.

The purpose of this study is to examine in-depth the parent-teacher conference with attention to the collection and analysis of relevant information regarding parent attitudes about meaningful parent-teacher communication. Analysis of the data provides information on parent attitudes, in response to a research void.

An open-ended questionnaire was designed to collect in-depth data on six topic areas: 1) the circumstances, 2) the importance, 3) the expectations, 4) the comfort level, 5) the characteristics, and 6) the description of what parents consider to be a meaningful parent-teacher conference.

Parents of elementary school age children were selected. The group would be characterized as upper middle class, professional or managerial, largely suburban families in metropolitan areas in New England and the Midwest.

The questionnaire was distributed by mail to 39 sets of parents; 30 responses were received. The responses were analyzed; the information was collated, noting patterns and trends.

The sample group represents only one of many groups and/or combination of groups which might be selected for questioning. The selected sample represents the constituency of the writer. Indeed the responses are only as representative as the sample.

Question 1

Question 1 sought to determine the circumstances under which parents do or would confer with a teacher. The question was asked: "Under what circumstances do or would you as a parent conference with a teacher?"

All respondents expect to confer with a teacher at school-initiated scheduled times throughout the school year. One respondent stated, "I try to attend all parent-teacher conferences arranged by the school whether the child is having any difficulties or not."

The respondents' comments may be placed in two categories: 1) the progress and/or problems of the child, and 2) the relationship and/or communication between the adults involved with the child.

When parents and teacher are discussing academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems the child is the focus of the parent-teacher conference. One respondent wrote:

> I would want to confer with a teacher if my child were having problems with subject matter; with classmates, teacher or other school personnel; or adjustment problems to schedules or routines. I would also like to know about my child's progress and his positive growth first-hand.

Another stated:

> A conference should be comprehensive and touch as many aspects of the child's adjustment at school (academic, social, emotional) including attitudes toward tasks, friends, classmates, teachers, authority, etc. A conference should be the writing between the lines of a report card.

One respondent noted the need for a parent-teacher conference in "good" times as well as "bad" times.

The adult relationship is the focus of the parent-teacher conference when parents first meet the teacher, in "a get-acquainted conference at the beginning of the school year." This conference "starts communication with the teacher/parent before problems arise." Later in the school year comments, questions and complaints are directed to and center on the teacher. Respondents indicate they would initiate a conference "to clarify some things the children would carry home," "if the teacher was not at least making an effort to respond to the needs of the child," to investigate any consistent negative complaints about school, or if the child "reported some oppression or neglect on the part of the teacher." Several respondents indicated they used these occasions to personally and informally evaluate the teacher.

Changes in the home and family crisis necessitate some conferences ("If there were changes at home (new baby, illness, divorce, etc.) I would ask to talk to the teacher giving an alert to let me know of reactions at school.")

Almost all of the respondents felt quite comfortable initiating a parent-teacher conference. Respondents comment "I would request," "I also would initiate," "we had some concern or question," and "we feel a special need."

In summary: Parents expect to confer with the teacher throughout the school year, either at school-initiated scheduled or parent-initiated requested meetings. Respondents' comments were placed in two categories: 1) the progress and/or problems of the child, and 2) the relationship and/or communication between the adults involved with the child.

When academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems are discussed, a need in both the "good" times and the "bad" times, the child is the focus of the parent-teacher conference. When parents and teacher first meet and when comments, questions, and complaints are presented the adult is the focus of the parent-teacher conference; these occasions may also to used to personally and informally evaluate the teacher. Changes at home also necessitate some parent-teacher conferences.

Many parents feel comfortable initiating a parent-teacher conference.

Question 2

Question 2 sought to determine the importance or unimportance of the parent-teacher conference to the parent. The question was asked: "In what ways is the parent-teacher conference important or unimportant to you?"

The parent-teacher conference is important to all respondents. One respondent states:

> It is unimportant to me in no way. Even if I think I know how things are with my child at school, I want to hear from the teacher.... I think these conferences are really vital to the teacher, parent and, most importantly, the child.

The respondents' concerns may be placed in two categories: 1) concern for evaluation, and 2) concern with communication.

When parent-teacher conferences are concerned with evaluation discussion centers on progress (assessment, rank, and potential) and problems, "Insight regarding scholastic progress, finding out about social and emotional adjustment." One respondent cautions, "It is very important that I remember that this is one person's point of view." Goals are shared, expectations discussed for "It is at these times that we begin to share expectations and better understand goals for children."

A concern with communication is repeated again and again. ("Important - for communication purposes." "Important to always maintain communication.") It is important to share knowledge and perceptions, to increase understanding, and to extend support. One respondent wrote:

> Parents and teachers are the two most important sets of adults in the child's life. It is important for these two sets of adults to try to understand each other.

Another stated, "It is reassuring and supportive to discuss my child's interests with someone else who knows him and cares

about him." The parent-teacher conference also provides opportunity to get to know and evaluate the teacher as "it gives me a chance, as a parent, to in an unprofessional way evaluate the teacher and his/her teaching techniques." ("If this sounds like I'm using the conference to gain some perspectives on the teacher as well as my child, that's exactly what I intend it to mean.")

The parent-teacher conference is unimportant when it is "merely a rehash of previous communication" or if it "repeats what I already know." One respondent noted the negative effect of anger, antagonism, and a closed mind, for "The child gets lost down the cracks while the adults do battle." Deception and incomplete information can be a source of frustration; as one respondent commented, "I never feel I am getting the true picture of my girls." Another respondent stated there is "not much a parent can do if the situation is bad."

In summary: The parent-teacher conference is important to parents. Respondents' concerns were placed in two categories: 1) concern for evaluation, and 2) concern with communication.

Parent-teacher conferences often occur out of concern for evaluation. These conferences focus on the child's progress and/or problems. They are also used to personally and informally evaluate the teacher.

Many parent-teacher conferences occur because of concern with communication. The sharing of knowledge leads to increased

understanding and extended support systems. Parents get to know and also evaluate the teacher through meaningful communication.

The parent-teacher conference is unimportant only if it is repetitive, antagonistic, deceptive, or closed.

Question 3

Question 3 sought to determine the expectations parents hold for the parent-teacher conference. Three questions were asked: "What are your expectations of a parent-teacher conference? What do you expect of the teacher? What do you expect of yourself?"

Respondents were asked to place their comments in one of three categories: 1) general expectations, 2) expectations of the teacher, and 3) expectations of the self. Upon analysis, each category may be subdivided into two categories: a) content, and b) communication.

All respondents expect a report of the child's progress as "I expect to share knowlege about my child with the teacher and I hope she shares her knowledge of my child with me." Topics discussed include performance, problems, curriculum, and suggestions. One respondent wrote:

> I want to know how the teacher views my child and what the teacher's attitude toward my child is - positive and/or negative. I also want to know first hand, how he is progressing in subject matter, in his developing of work habits and skills, and in his adjustment to the total school environment, and to see how I can help my child.

Most respondents want to communicate with the teacher. ("Communication - teacher and parent, parent and child.") A respondent anticipates "the parents and teachers both come together with open minds and real concern for the child's growth." Communication is based on sharing and understanding, and thus a partnership is formed. ("We expect the teacher to be thinking in terms of a partnership with parents.") Conversation includes information exchange and a discussion of goals and expectations, views and attitudes. The preferred communication style is characterized as open, honest, concerned, and supportive. One respondent wrote:

> Getting to know each other as persons. Communicating those things that just cannot be scraped off a piece of paper. Asking questions, sharing concerns, seeking solutions, exchanging ideas, respecting each other's role with the child and undergirding each other whenever possible.

Expectations of the teacher center in the giving of information. A report is anticipated on academic progress in subject matter focused on the work of the child. Respondents expect the teacher to share his/her personal knowledge of the child, "to give a fair assessment of the child's progress socially and academically." One respondent wrote, "Not only do I want to find out how my child is doing academically but also as a person. That is just as important to me, if not more so." The teacher comes prepared to discuss the child, "to put the child first." One respondent expects the teacher to make "some level of commitment to his/her class." Several respondents note

a preference for aware, open, and understanding communication, demonstrated through interest, honesty, courtesy, and respect.

Expectations of the self center on communication. One respondent "comes to the conference prepared to put the child first;" another prepares for the conference "by looking at things from the teacher's point of view." Many respondents also come to the conference to share information; one respondent stated, "we would be willing to contribute any information that the teacher might find helpful, for we feel education is most effective when both parents and teacher work together." Another respondent comes to share and compare a child's reactions, for "teacher and parent both need to know if the child is showing a similiar or different picture at home and school." Three respondents expect helpful suggestions because "I would expect the teacher to let me know ways I could help and I would expect that it is my responsibility to respond."

One respondent expects to make "some commitment to my child or class and teacher." Many respondents want open and honest, active participation in the conference; one respondent noted an attitude of "mutual respect." Many respondents expect to support the teacher as he/she works with the child, hoping "that I will provide to everyone whose life impacts with my child all the support I can."

In summary: Parents approach the parent-teacher conference with their own expectations. Respondents' comments were placed

in three categories: 1) general expectations, 2) expectations of the teacher, and 3) expectations of the self. Each category may be subdivided into two categories: a) content, and b) communication.

Parents expect a report of the child's progress, including performance, problems, curriculum, and suggestions. Most parents want to communicate with the teacher, exchanging information, discussing goals and expectations; a partnership might be formed. The preferred style of communication is open, honest, concerned, and supportive.

Expectations of the teacher center on the giving of information. The teacher is expected to share his/her knowledge of the child, and to put the child first. Through interest, honesty, courtesy, and respect the teacher demonstrates the degree of his/her sensitivity to open and understanding communication.

Expectations of the self center on communication. Information is shared, reactions compared, and helpful suggestions made. An open and honest active participant role based on mutual respect can lead to support of the teacher.

Question 4

Question 4 sought to determine the factors which contribute to both the comfort and the discomfort of parents in the parent-teacher conference situation. The question was asked: "What contributes to your comfort or discomfort in this setting?"

The responses may be placed in three categories: 1) the mechanics of the parent-teacher conference setting, 2) the style of communication, and 3) the personality of the teacher.

The respondents indicate the comfortable environment is less formal and private, encouraging conversation. The classroom, with seating for adult comfort, is the preferred setting. Scheduling for the convenience of parents is appreciated. Discomfort occurs when the pace is rushed and other parents are waiting; lack of privacy creates strain in conversation.

The teacher often sets the tone for the parent-teacher conference. ("Teacher sets the mood for the conference," "the attitude of the teacher.") Most respondents are comfortable with communication which is open and honest; a feeling of mutual respect is supportive. When communication becomes clouded with external problems discomfort rises; one respondent is uncomfortable with surprises about performance or behavior. Communication breaks down for another respondent when communication ceases to be a dialogue.

The teacher is the focus of most respondents' comments. Many respondents are more comfortable when the teacher is interested, prepared and relaxed, objective and thorough. One respondent wrote:

> I feel relaxed when I know the teacher is genuinely interested in my child, is willing to level honestly with me, and is willing to listen to my thoughts and opinions.

One respondent is uncomfortable giving information because "I do not know how they will use the information I give them and I am a little reserved." The comparison of children is disconcerting to two respondents, for "often teachers create a setting of comparison with others rather than a comparison with the child's own self." A superior attitude or an attacking approach on the part of the teacher causes discomfort. Finally, discomfort rises from disrespect or lack of respect for or from either the parents or the teacher.

In summary: Parents are both comfortable and uncomfortable in the parent-teacher conference situation. Respondents' comments were placed in three categories: 1) the mechanics of the conference situation, 2) the style of communication, and 3) the personality of the teacher.

The comfortable environment for a parent-teacher conference is informal, private, and located in the classroom. Scheduling occurs for the convenience of parents. A hurried pace, tardiness, and lack of privacy cause discomfort.

The teacher often sets the tone for the conference. Communication which is open and honest is respectful and supportive. Clouded communication, monologue, and surprises are discomforting.

The personality of the teacher influences the comfort or discomfort levels of parents. Parents are comfortable with a teacher who is interested, prepared, and relaxed. The use of information, the comparison of children, a superior attitude, and a lack of respect contribute to parent discomfort.

Question 5

Question 5 sought a description of a meaningful parent-teacher conference. The question was asked: "Think about a meaningful parent-teacher conference. How would you characterize this conference?"

The responses may be placed in three categories: 1) the mechanics of the conference setting, 2) the concern for meaningful communication, and 3) the roles of the adults, teacher, and parents.

The respondents noted several factors which influence the mechanics of the parent-teacher conference; a classroom environment, privacy, ample time, and an acknowledged purpose. Four respondents stated the importance of ending the conference with a definite plan of action.

Real communication between parents and teacher was characteristic of many meaningful parent-teacher conferences, for "the meaningful parent-teacher conference should be just one part of open communication." A respondent described a meaningful parent-teacher conference as

> a portion of a growing relationship which focuses on a deepening and understanding of what goes on in a three-way world, i.e., child-school-home, and therefore in at least three people's lives--child-teacher-parent.

Caring and sharing, thinking and problem-solving, respecting and relating, further characterize meaningful parent-teacher conferences. One respondent summarizes:

> Mainly, I would characterize it as a meeting between two people who have at least one very important special common interest--a child. It's an exchange of information, ideas and plans. A meeting of two minds with one purpose. A give and take type of situation where personal differences are put aside and the parent and teacher communicate openly for the good of the child.

Another respondent states succinctly, "Mutual respect, mutual sharing, mutual concern for children and the adults involved with children."

The teacher should be prepared with individual comments and examples of the children's work; helpful suggestions should be offered. Respondents like a teacher who is friendly and sincere, and interested in the child. Several respondents also want the teacher to be a good listener. One respondent wrote:

> We knew the teacher liked our child; was interested in his whole development, cared what he thought of others, challenged him academically, helped him be proud of his accomplishments and was proud of his accomplishments by her encouragement of dialogue between herself and parents, by the materials brought to the conference.

The respondents seek to obtain and exchange information, one respondent describing an ideal parent-teacher conference as "one between both parents and all the child's teachers exchanging information as they know the child." Questions are raised, assistance is sought; one respondent likes to leave a conference "with a feeling that the child has benefitted from this time of sharing." Parents also seek encouragement and support from the teacher; a respondent wrote, "The teacher made

me feel that Z. and I were more than capable of dealing with the situation. She helped my confidence in dealing with a problem."

In summary: Parents know what constitutes a meaningful conference. Respondents' comments were placed in three categories: 1) the mechanics of the conference, 2) the concern for meaningful communication, and 3) the roles of the adults, teacher and parents.

The classroom environment, privacy, ample time, and purpose influence the mechanics of the conference. Many parents desire a definite plan of action for follow-through and problem-solving.

Real communication, caring and sharing, thinking and problem-solving, respecting and relating, characterize meaningful parent-teacher conferences. An interested teacher, prepared to discuss the individual child, is also a good listener. Many parents want to obtain and exchange information, finding encouragement and support in many teachers.

Question 6

Question 6 sought to determine ways in which the parent-teacher conference could be made more meaningful to parents. The question was asked: "How might the parent-teacher conference be made more meaningful to you?"

The respondents' suggestions may be placed in two categories: 1) those related to progress reporting, and 2) those related to communication.

Many suggestions were made to improve progress reporting. Parents might have the written progress report before the parent-teacher conference. Ample time should be allowed for the parent-teacher conference. Teacher comments can be too superficial; one respondent suggested the negative might reflect poorly on the teacher. More specific information could be given; a respondent stated, "I would also prefer to have the teacher tell me more about specific incidents or activities at school rather than many vague general comments." Knowledge of the child's strengths and weaknesses was requested; a respondent noted, "For some reason, teachers tend to be much less specific about the things children do well." Examples of the child's work provide a meaningful way of sharing. Two respondents asked for more comparisons of the child with others at the same level; another respondent wrote, "The child is an individual and should not be compared to anyone else." Many respondents wanted specific suggestions for handling problems, procedures, or enrichment, for "Most of all, I like to come away from a conference with a new idea for how I can promote a good school experience for my child."

The expansion of communication networks seemed central. Two respondents suggested the active involvement of children in the parent-teacher conference process, for "Teachers should communicate to the children also what they are communicating to the parents, and, of course, parents should be honest with their own children." One respondent advocated a role for parents in the selection of the child's teacher.

The need for parent-teacher support system was noted in several responses. ("Parents need a confidence build up, too.") The key factor in developing a meaningful parent-teacher conference seems to be the element of caring. One respondent wrote, "We have been most fortunate in having teachers that have really cared. This makes such a difference."

In summary: Parents have constructive suggestions for making parent-teacher conferences more meaningful. Respondents' comments were placed in two categories: 1) those related to progress reporting, and 2) those related to communication.

Parents could receive the written progress report before the conference, for which adequate time is allowed. More in-depth and specific information, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses, could be given. Some parents request comparisons of children; others are uncomfortable with comparisons. Many parents want specific suggestions for enriching the child's school experience.

Communication networks could be expanded to include the child. Parents might be given a more active role in the teacher assignment process.

The need for parent-teacher support systems is obvious. Caring seems to be a key.

Discussion

Both the literature and the data support the position that the parent-teacher conference is generally accepted as an effective means of communication between parents and teacher.

Parents expect to confer with the teacher at school-initiated or parent-initiated conferences throughout the school year. Both the literature and the data indicate a conference might be called out of concern for the progress and/or problems of the child. Concern for communication and the relationship between the adults is expressed more strongly in the data than in the literature.

The data indicates conversation on the academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems of the child is expected; strengths and weaknesses are acknowledged. Specific suggestions are made. A conference should take place in both "good" and "bad" times.

Some parents request comparisons with other children; others do not. The writer, who is a classroom teacher, will not compare one child with another in the conference situation; she speaks only in terms of the growth and change within the individual child under discussion.

Much of the literature deals with the structure of and guidelines for a good parent-teacher conference. The data makes mention of these topics.

The mechanics of the parent-teacher conference influence the effectiveness of the conference. Conferences scheduled with

consideration for the convenience of parents may be approached in a more positive manner. When the circumstances surrounding the conference are acknowledged, parents and teacher approach the conference with a sense of purpose clearly in mind. The conference should begin punctually; ample time should be allowed.

The physical environment in which the parent-teacher conference takes place is important. Certain settings are more conducive to conversation and communication than are others. Consideration should be given to providing an informal private setting in the classroom where the child's school environment can be shared with parents.

Analysis of the data strongly supports the premises parents are increasingly concerned about communication between home and school, parents and teacher. Yet communication is hardly mentioned in the literature on the parent-teacher conference, one reference referring to the communication process.

Most parents want to communicate with the teacher, to be informed, to help and to be helped, to offer and to receive support in their respective roles.

The exchange of information and the sharing of concerns does lead to an increased understanding and an extension of the support system between parents and teacher. The parent-teacher conference provides the opportunity for parents and teacher to meet. Information shared with the child adds a particularly meaningful dimension to the communication network.

An attitude of mutual respect underlies effective parent-teacher communication. Communication which is clear, open and honest, based in interest and concern, is conducive to real sharing between parents and teacher. The teacher needs to be listener as well as speaker; the emphasis is, after all, on exchanging and sharing information about the child.

Anything which leads to a breakdown in communication (attack, antagonism, repetition) weakens or destroys the parent-teacher relationship.

Both the literature and the data place the teacher in a key role. The teacher often sets the tone for the conference. If he/she is prepared with information on and work by the individual child he/she can be relaxed.

Parents and teacher use the conference to personally and informally evaluate each other as well as the child. Parents evaluate the teacher as the teacher of their child and as a person; the teacher evaluates the parents in relation to their support of the teacher or the classroom.

The parent-teacher conference does indeed provide an opportunity for the parents and the teacher to support the healthy growth and development of the child.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

1) Parents expect to confer with the teacher throughout the school year, either at school-initiated or parent-initiated meetings. Parents and teacher confer on the progress and/or problems of the child and the concerns and/or problems of parent-teacher communication.

When academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems are discussed the child is the focus of the parent-teacher conference. When parents and teacher first meet and when comments, questions and complaints are presented the adult is the focus of the parent-teacher conference. These occasions may also be used to personally and informally evaluate the teacher. Changes at home also necessitate some parent-teacher conferences.

Many parents feel comfortable initiating a parent-teacher conference.

2) The parent-teacher conference is important to parents. Parents are increasingly concerned about communication between home and school, parents and teacher.

Most parents want to communicate with the teacher, to be informed, to help and to be helped, to offer and to receive

support in their roles.

The parent-teacher conference provides the opportunity for parents and teacher to meet. Parent-teacher conferences often occur out of concern for evaluation, focusing on the child's progress and/or problems; they are also used to personally and informally evaluate the teacher. Many parent-teacher conferences occur because of concern with communication. The sharing of information with the child adds a particularly meaningful dimension to the communication network.

The sharing of knowledge leads to increased understanding of the child and his/her educational growth and to an extended support system between the adults involved with the child.

3) Parents approach the parent-teacher conference with their own expectations. Expectations focus on the sharing of knowledge about the child and the communication between the adults involved with the child.

Parents expect a report of the child's progress, including performance, problems, curriculum, and suggestions. Most parents want to communicate with the teacher, exchanging information and discussing goals and expectations.

Expectations of the teacher center on the giving of information. The teacher is expected to share his/her knowledge of the child, to put the child first. Through interest, honesty, courtesy, and respect the teacher demonstrates the degree of his/her sensitivity to open and understanding communication.

Expectations of the self center on communication. Information is shared, reactions are compared, and helpful suggestions made. An open and honest active participant role based on mutual respect can lead to support of the teacher.

Parents and teacher use the conference to personally and informally evaluate each other as well as the child. Parents evaluate the teacher as the teacher of their child and as a person; the teacher evaluates the parents in relation to their support of the teacher or the classroom.

4) Parents are both comfortable and somewhat uncomfortable in the parent-teacher conference situation.

The comfortable environment for the parent-teacher conference is informal, private, and located in the classroom. Scheduling occurs for the convenience of parents. A hurried pace, tardiness, and lack of privacy cause discomfort.

The teacher often sets the tone for the conference. Communication which is open and honest is respectful and supportive; clouded communication, surprises, and a monologue are discomforting. The teacher needs to be listener as well as speaker.

The personality of the teacher influences the comfort or discomfort levels of parents. Parents are comfortable with a teacher who is interested, prepared, and relaxed. The use of information, the comparison of children, a superior attitude, and a lack of respect contribute to parent discomfort.

An attitude of mutual respect underlies effective parent-teacher communication. Communication which is clear, open, and honest, based in interest and concern, is conducive to real sharing between parents and teacher.

5) Parents know what constitutes a meaningful parent-teacher conference.

The physical environment in which the parent-teacher conference takes place is important. Consideration should be given to providing an informal private setting in the classroom where the child's school environment can be shared with parents. The classroom environment, privacy, time and purpose influence the mechanics of the conference.

Many parents want to obtain and exchange information. Many parents desire a definite plan of action for follow-through and problem-solving.

Real communication, caring and sharing, thinking and problem-solving, respecting and relating, characterizes meaningful parent-teacher conferences. Anything which leads to a breakdown in communication (attack, antagonism, repetition) weakens or destroys the parent-teacher relationship.

6) Parents have constructive suggestions for making the parent-teacher conference more meaningful.

Conferences scheduled with consideration for the convenience of parents may be approached in a more positive manner. When

the circumstances surrounding the conference are acknowledged, parents and teacher approach the conference with a sense of purpose clearly in mind.

Parents could receive the written progress report before the conference, for which adequate time is allowed. More in-depth and specific information, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses, could be given. Some parents request comparisons of children; others are uncomfortable with comparisons. Many parents want specific suggestions for enriching the child's school experience.

A caring attitude, based in sharing, is a key in establishing meaningful and effective parent-teacher support systems.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine parent attitudes toward parent-teacher communication in the setting of the parent-teacher conference. Respondents were asked to share in-depth their thoughts about parent-teacher communication in this setting.

An open-ended questionnaire was designed to collect in-depth data on six topic areas: 1) the circumstances, 2) the importance, 3) the expectations, 4) the comfort level, 5) the characteristics, and 6) the description of what parents consider to be a meaningful parent-teacher conference. The questionnaire was distributed by mail to 39 sets of parents of elementary school age children; the sample group would be characterized as upper middle class, professional or managerial, largely suburban

families in New England and Midwestern metropolitan areas. Thirty responses were received.

A typology of parent-teacher conferences developed by Hertel (1975) contains seven types of parent-teacher conferences. These types include the following: the social conference (#1), the progress conference (#2), the program conference (#3), the problem conference (#4), the helping conference (#5), the upset-parent conference (#6), and the sharing conference (#7). Detailed descriptions of these seven types may be found in Appendix B.

Data from this study verified the existence of these theoretical conference types. The development of these seven conference types was based on the professional experiences of this writer. Findings from this study suggest that this typology is realistic in the sense that respondents have experienced the seven types of conferences. The following discussion refers to and elaborates upon this typology.

The parent-teacher conference generally is accepted as an effective means of communication between parents and teachers. Parents expect to conference with teachers on the academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems of the child, and the communication and/or relationship between the adults. Many parents expressed that they are comfortable in initiating a parent-teacher conference.

The parent-teacher conference appears to be important to parents, with this study's respondents indicating that they

utilize most or all of the seven parent-teacher conference types outlined above. These conference types seem to facilitate the needs and interests of parents surrounding their relations with the public school and the classroom. Parents are concerned with evaluation, centered on the progress and/or problems of the child. Parents want to share and discuss goals and expectations for their child. The progress conference (#2) is held to report academic progress, with the parent and teacher speaking in general and specific terms about the child's academic and social progress and discussing ways of supporting and extending the emerging growth pattern. A problem conference (#4) is held to discuss a problem, to express concern, to establish joint responsibility for helping, and to create a plan of action. The responses in this study clearly indicate parents want to be informed of problems and to work toward their resolution.

Parents are concerned about their interpersonal relationship with teachers. The social conference (#1) provides opportunity for parent and teacher to communicate on school and non-school issues and establish a working relationship that will provide a foundation of rapport for dealing with school related matters.

The program conference (#3) provides opportunity for the teacher to explain school and classroom procedures and for the parent to react and question. This exchange of information leads to increased understanding of and between parents, teachers and the child. The helping conference (#5) gives parents and teacher

the opportunity to discuss a problem and seek a workable solution; through speaking, listening and planning together parents and teacher seek ways of helping the child. The responses in this study indicate many parents do or would ask a teacher for help in understanding and/or handling their children. The upset-parent conference (#6) permits an issue to be brought into the open and dealt with realistically; parent concerns are aired, clarifications made by the teacher. The teacher holds the key role in setting the tone of parent-teacher communication, through listening as well as speaking; parents and teachers use the conference to personally and informally evaluate each other. The sharing conference (#7) is held to share the work of and/or observed change in the child; the observed change is meaningfully and personally shared with the parent. The child might be included in this type of conference.

Parents approach the parent-teacher conference with their own expectations. General expectations of the conference, expectations of teachers and expectations of self focus on content (the report of the academic, social, emotional and/or behavioral progress and/or problems of the child) and communication (the interpersonal style and the exchange of information). The major parental expectation of teachers centers on content; parents basically want to know how their child is doing in the classroom. The personality of teachers seems to be an important variable; parents indicated that they are comfortable with teachers who are respectful, interested, prepared, thorough, and objective

and uncomfortable with a superior attitude and deception. The major expectation of self centers on communication; parents desire a participant role.

Respondents in this study identified a number of factors that in their judgment provide support for a meaningful parent-teacher conference. The classroom environment is informal and private, scheduling is for the convenience of parents, the conference begins punctually, the purpose is clearly stated, ample time is allowed. Parents are uncomfortable with a lack of privacy, tardiness, and a hurried pace. An attitude of mutual respect serves as a basis for effective parent-teacher communication.

Parents have constructive suggestions regarding the arrangements for the parent-teacher conference (scheduling, time allotment, circumstances, purpose, reporting), the quality of the content (specific information given, suggestions made), and communication (mutual sharing). Some parents wish for a comparative evaluation of children; others, do not.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for school personnel, school boards, teacher education institutions, further research, parents, and children. The following implications are an outgrowth of the application of the research data in this study to the professional experience and perceptions of this writer on the education process.

The teacher must increase his/her knowledge about and skill in the parent-teacher conference. Through the personal parent-

teacher conference, home-school communication networks are meaningfully established and maintained. Much of the literature on the parent-teacher conference is directed to the mechanics of the parent-teacher conference: the circumstances for talking together, the structure of the parent-teacher conference, the content of the parent-teacher conference, and guidelines to be followed in the parent-teacher conference. Yet this does not address the issue of effective parent-teacher communication. The teacher must become more sensitive to parents; the parent-teacher conference must be made more meaningful for both parents and teacher.

The principal must increase his/her knowledge about the parent-teacher conference. The principal has a key role in creating a school atmosphere in which meaningful parent-teacher communication can take place, making the necessary institutional arrangements for parent-teacher conferences (time, scheduling, uninterrupted space) and supporting the teacher as he/she participates in these conferences. Increased home-school cooperation can result in a clearer understanding of what is both desirable and effective in the education of the child.

The superintendent must increase his/her knowledge about parent-teacher communication and, therefore, home-school communication. Parent understanding of the educational process and the school system is increased through an effective communication network; yet problems in home-school communication are rampant and the effects far-reaching and profound. The field of inter-

personal communication provides insight into the dynamics of the parent-teacher conference, the communication process central to the parent-teacher conference; yet the communication process is little explored in relation to the parent-teacher conference. An in-service program for professional staff development could be designed to increase teacher awareness of the importance of and communication processes involved in the parent-teacher conference. Further in-service could be designed to increase teacher's skill in engaging in meaningful communication in the parent-teacher conference setting.

The school board could improve its communication with members of the larger community through attention to the parent-teacher conference. The board must provide release time for parents and teacher to meet. Further commitments of time and money could provide an in-service program for professional staff development in communication skills relevant to and utilized in the parent-teacher conference.

Teacher education institutions in the pre- and in-service professional education of teachers should introduce and provide information about both the content and the communication processes of the parent-teacher conference. Literature focused on pre-school education seems to devote more attention to parent-teacher communication than does literature focused on formal school education. Most teachers are provided little or no training and/or assistance in preparation for or participation in the parent-teacher conference, a void they must fill for themselves

as best they can. Advances in methodology (i.e., role play) and technology (i.e., video tape) could be utilized in the initial and continuing education of teachers in communication areas.

The study has implications for research activity. The study might be replicated or revised with a different population group. Comparative studies could be done. The extensive open-ended responses could be used as a data base in the development of attitudinal scales and other research instruments. The use and style of communication in both successful and unsuccessful teachers could be examined.

The study has implications for parents. Parents have the right and the responsibility to know about the child's life at school; today's parents are increasingly exercising this right and accepting this responsibility. Certainly parents benefit from thinking about parent-teacher communication, resulting in a clarification of interests and concerns, convictions, and values. A program could be designed to assist parents in this task. The feeling of being alone can be somewhat alleviated through knowledge others share convictions, concerns, and responsibilities. Parents must increase their sensitivity to teachers, for teachers are not always comfortable in the parent-teacher conference situation.

The study has implications for children. The parent-teacher conference is held on behalf of the child. Therefore, the child must benefit when two key adult figures in his/her life, parents

and teachers, meet together out of mutual respect and concern to encourage, support, and facilitate his/her growth and development.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Parent-Teacher Conference At The Elementary School Level

Assumptions:

Parent-teacher communication is essential for the growth of the child. The parent-teacher conference is the most effective means of communication concerning the child.

1. Under what circumstances do or would you as a parent conference with a teacher?

2. In what ways is the parent-teacher conference important or unimportant to you?

QUESTIONNAIRE

3. What are your expectations of a parent-teacher conference?

(a) What do you expect of the teacher?

(b) What do you expect of yourself?

4. What contributes to your comfort or discomfort in this setting?

QUESTIONNAIRE

5. Think about a meaningful parent-teacher conference. How would you characterize this conference?

6. How might the parent-teacher conference be made more meaningful for you?

APPENDIX B

A TYPOLOGY OF PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

The following typology of parent-teacher conferences from the writer's experience with parent-teacher conferences served as the base for the development of the questionnaire.

1) The social conference

Purpose: 1) To become better acquainted, and
2) to build a working relationship.

Parent and teacher meet, discussing school attitudes of the child and establishing a working relationship.

Mrs. I. entered the classroom; the teacher walked across the room to greet her. They talked as they walked to the carpeted area and occasional chairs. Mrs. I. noted areas around the room and commented on them, particularly the science area and the "Mystery Powders" center which F. had mentioned at home. They reached the rug area and settled themselves comfortably. Mrs. I. referred to the attractive and comfortable classroom.

The teacher commented on F.'s obvious pleasure and involvement in the classroom, of his motivation and involvement in his own learning, and of the high quality of his work. Mrs. I. spoke of F.'s enthusiasm about school as conveyed to others in the family, particularly to the older children.

Mrs. I. inquired about any problems. The teacher commented on aspects of social adjustment which were at times troublesome.

Mrs. I. noted similar patterns at home. Parent and teacher discussed possible solutions which might enable F. to grow in his ability to deal with others.

Mrs. I. offered to send materials from her kitchen to supplement materials in the "Mystery Powders" center.

Mrs. I. and the teacher agreed to keep each other informed on any changes in any area of F.'s life, and to confer again in several months.

2) The progress conference

Purpose: To report academic progress

Parent and teacher speak in general and specific terms about the child's academic and social progress, discussing ways of supporting and extending the emerging growth pattern.

Mrs. M. entered the classroom smiling. The teacher rose to greet her. They made plans for the younger children to take things to the sand area adjoining the classroom; when they were settled, parent and teacher moved to the rug area.

They talked in general terms about Y.'s academic progress, moving quickly to her reading. The teacher showed Mrs. M. the book Y. had read earlier in the day; she was thrilled, for Y. had had a long history of so-called reading problems. Mrs. M. asked what had happened. The teacher explained the approach she had found successful in dealing with Y. Mrs. M. spoke of Y.'s responses to certain conditions at home. Together parent

and teacher discussed ways of supporting and extending the growth pattern that seemed to be emerging.

Mrs. M. asked about other signs of growth in the classroom. The teacher mentioned several specific instances of personal and social growth. Mrs. M. commented on Y.'s recent involvements in the neighborhood.

Mrs. M. and the teacher agreed to do all they could to keep the momentum going by whatever supportive means could be found.

3) The program conference

Purpose: To explain school and classroom procedures (curriculum, organization, expectations, etc.).

Mrs. A. and the teacher met for the first time, the A. family having recently moved into the community. Mrs. A. entered the classroom hesitantly; the teacher greeted her, and introduced herself. They talked about settling the family into a new environment. Mrs. A., a former teacher, commented on the classroom, its contents and arrangements.

Parent and teacher walked around the room. The teacher commented on the areas, materials therein, town-wide curriculum in subject areas, children's use of materials, and the children's work in the areas. Mrs. A. asked questions and inserted comments about N.'s preferences for areas of study.

Eventually they reached the rug area. The teacher offered information about classroom procedures; she invited Mrs. A.'s questions. Mrs. A. inquired about several specific areas of personal concern (program, procedures, adjustment); the teacher answered her questions and invited comment.

The teacher invited Mrs. A. to spend a morning in the classroom. Mrs. A. was delighted with the invitation, expressing her curiosity about the room in operation.

Mrs. A. and the teacher agreed to hold a conference on N.'s academic progress in several weeks. A tentative date was set.

Mrs. A. expressed her appreciation for the teacher's time with her (over one hour); the teacher expressed her appreciation of Mrs. A.'s time. Parent and teacher laughed together.

4) The problem conference

Purpose:
1) To discuss a problem,
2) to show the parent the teacher is concerned,
3) to establish joint responsibility for helping the child, and
4) to create a plan for resolution or elimination of the problem.

The teacher shares recent social developments, expressing confusion about the cause; the parent responds with pertinent information, enabling parent and teacher jointly to plan an approach to the elimination of the problem.

Mrs. B. entered the classroom; E. greeted her, the teacher followed. E. took Mrs. B. to the writing area to show her E.'s latest book in progress; Mrs. B. and E. shared the book together. E. noticed the time, then left to go to gym. Mrs. B. and the teacher went to the rug area.

The teacher expressed to Mrs. B. appreciation of her stopping in at school today. The teacher stated she had something she wanted to share with her regarding recent developments in E.'s relationship with others in the classroom (willfulness, manipulation, sulking); the teacher pointed out such behavior had interferred with his happiness with himself and with his relationships with others. The teacher stated she could not establish an event or situation which might have initiated such behaviors; she asked for Mrs. B.'s help.

E.'s will and behavior at home was discussed; Mrs. B. mentioned recent family incidents which were pertinent. Mrs. B. and the teacher planned a joint approach to working through reason (a successful approach at an earlier time) and responding only to E.'s positive and constructive behaviors.

Parent and teacher agreed to talk via telephone the next week, sooner if necessary, and to be alert to clues about conditions that trigger the negative behavior.

5) The helping conference

Purpose: 1) To listen to the parent, and
2) to think together

Parents initiate a conference to discuss a problem and seek a workable solution. Through speaking, listening and planning together parents and teacher seek ways of helping the child.

Mr. and Mrs. D. asked for a conference, indicating they were puzzled and exasperated by some of O.'s behavior.

Mr. and Mrs. D. entered the classroom, noting and commenting upon changes since last they were in the room. The teacher stood to greet them as they continued walking around the room; eventually they came to the rug area.

The teacher stated the reason for the conference. Mrs. D. stated her concern; Mr. and Mrs. D. shared recent observations about O.'s bossy, superior ways. Mr. D. stated they wanted to talk with someone who was involved with O. outside the home. The teacher commented on some of the tendencies she had observed at school.

Together they looked for factors which seemed to initate the response in O. They could not find them; the teacher agreed to look more carefully at O.'s circumstances in school.

Mrs. D. spoke of recent events and interactions in the home which seemed relevant. The teacher listened as she verbalized her thinking. Together they looked for ways of dealing with the situation, both at home and at school.

Mrs. D. and the teacher agreed to talk via the telephone the next week, to hold another conference in several weeks.

Mr. D. told the teacher they were appreciative of the opportunity to come for a conference on such short notice.

6) The upset-parent conference

Purpose: 1) To bring an issue into the open, and
2) to deal with it.

An issue is brought into the open and dealt with realistically. Parent concerns are aired, clarifications made by the teacher.

Mrs. U. asked to see the teacher. A conference was arranged within the week.

Mrs. U. entered the classroom; the teacher greeted her. She asked to go to S.'s cubbie; the teacher took her to it. She spent a period of time going through S.'s things, chatting about her work as she found items of interest. The teacher asked her if she was looking for something in particular; she replied she was looking for S.'s math book. The teacher found the book, and invited Mrs. U. to the rug area.

The teacher inquired about the request for a conference. Mrs. U. smiled, then asked if S. was getting her work done. The teacher asked Mrs. U. to be more specific. Mrs. U. thumbed through the math book.

The teacher assured her S. was working consistently, most recently in making and writing books; she reached to a bookshelf

and got one of her creations.

The teacher asked what had brought Mrs. U. and the questions to her. Mrs. U. explained S. stated she didn't work at school, just fooled around all day; she insisted she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do. Mrs. U. jumped immediately to the informal classroom, talking at length.

A moment of silence followed. The teacher commented she was glad Mrs. U. had shared her concern with her. The teacher stated there were certain matters she would like to clarify: about S., about the expectations, about this classroom, and about the informal classroom. The teacher spoke simply and to the point.

Mrs. U. acknowledged the possibility she might have over-reacted. The teacher assured her we all need to air our concerns and receive clarification on numerous occasions.

The teacher invited Mrs. U. to visit the classroom any morning, at her convenience. The teacher expressed the wish to talk with her again, and thanked her for coming.

7) The sharing conference

Purpose: To share work of or observed change in the child.

The work of and observed change in the child is meaningfully and personally shared with the parents.

Mr. and Mrs. H. entered the classroom smiling; the teacher walked across the room to greet them. Mr. H. commented this was

the first time they had been called to school on good news, expressing their pleasure in the occasion.

The teacher commented on the all too common practice of conferencing only under negative conditions. She spoke of a personal crusade to conference under positive conditions as well. The teacher mentioned the exciting growth she had seen in I., and spoke of her wish to share this directly with her parents. Both Mr. and Mrs. H. commented affirmatively on observations they too had made.

The teacher presented evidence of change: 1) in academic work, describing and showing examples of I.'s work - Mr. H. noted I. was using books differently at home, 2) in social growth, working and playing with others in constructive ways - Mrs. H. expressed her delight in a friendship, a party and an overnight invitation, and 3) in emotional growth, exhibiting positive feeling in herself and others, showing confidence in herself, and radiating a sense of happiness and well-being - Mrs. H. spoke of situations at home and in the neighborhood.

Silence followed. Both Mr. and Mrs. H. smiled, eye contact evidence of deep involvement in sharing at a meaningful level. Mrs. H. commented through damp eyes, "I love my child. We've been through so much. I think we're going to make it. Thank you." The teacher smiled, nodded, and reached out and touched her hand. The teacher was deeply moved. They sat in silence.

The teacher sensed it was time for closure. She expressed

her joy in Mr. and Mrs. H. coming to school this day; both Mr. and Mrs. H. acknowledged the same.

All agreed to keep one another informed on further progress or any problems.